

# Appreciating the Archives and Archival Thinking of the Middle East and North Africa

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The region of North Africa and the Middle East (sometimes called Southwest Asia) rarely appears in American archival literature unless it is used as a metaphor for a stark cultural opposite. As a result, the depth and intricacies of its long and diverse histories and vibrant living cultures are seldom given adequate consideration. Archives and archival collections in the region tend to be described (solely) in the negative—as absent, decaying, violently destroyed, or totally inaccessible. And while this may be the case in some instances (the Palestinian poet, Tamim Barghouti writes in reference to a museum in Iraq, “A leaf in the rubble documents it / A document brings the rubble to life”<sup>1</sup>), this does not adequately describe the totality of situations for archival collections in the region. Problematically, such a viewpoint also tends to set up the west as a necessary place of refuge for archival collections (without interrogating the role of the west in fermenting instability in the region), and without an appreciation for the provenance of the collections and the meaning the materials have in the lives of people in and from the region.

In May 2023, I was asked to participate in the fourth iteration of the UNDERCURRENTS project, an alliance between three Moroccan cultural organizations located in Marrakech: Dar Bellarj, LE 18, and MAHAL. The theme of this program was “Building Archives,” and it was conceived of as a weeklong training of local Moroccans on archival practice and theory. The director of Dar Bellarj, Maha Elmadhi, discussed the training as part of its ongoing work to increase and support archival awareness and sensibilities among Moroccans in general and especially among the community of people living in the old city of Marrakech where Dar Bellarj is located (the historic building suffered some damage in the tragic September

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2023 earthquake, but no one was hurt and the work continues). I found that “archival thinking” was alive and well among the attendees of the UNDERCURRENTS program. These Moroccans in their teens, 20s, and 30s take seriously what they see to be a duty to safeguard local traditions and collect and preserve archival materials. They also want to understand the breach caused by French colonization, its ramifications for archival heritage, and how to recover from it. Most importantly, they want to develop the skills to archive and preserve the cultural materials themselves. The lack of access to archival education, the equivalent to that which professionals in North America are able to acquire at a graduate level, is one of the more pressing needs of the region, and yet, it is rarely addressed in criticisms of the situation of archives in the region. The week at the UNDERCURRENTS program was transformative for me, as I learned as much from the participants as I hope they learned from me. I learned to have at least some degree of optimism about the archival future of North Africa.

This Special Section on archives in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) asks us to reconsider the role of place and people in the making of archival collections and the meaning-making work of archives. It invites us to change our relationship with a region that is frequently othered and violently dominated. The articles in this Special Section bring to light the value of archival collections in the MENA



**FIGURE 1.** A photo, of what appears to be a Jewish Moroccan family in Tangier, taken in 1904 by German-American photographer Arnold Genthe. The title given by the Library of Congress, where it is held, is “Travel Views of Morocco.”

region as well as those kept at institutions in North America and Europe. The Special Section is itself an icebreaker, as there is so much more work to be done to adequately know and articulate the archival situation in the Middle East and North Africa and how it effects the lives of people there and in diaspora.

As some of the articles here show, when materials from the MENA region are in mainstream western repositories, they are often relegated to the realm of the exotic, and their descriptive metadata seldom provides descriptions with proper contextual information. Take, for example, Figure 1. It is part of a collection of images from the estate of a German-American photographer Arnold Genthe, acquired by the Library of Congress after his death. In 1904, the photographer visited the city of Tangier. The photo, to those familiar with Moroccan culture and history, seems to be of a Moroccan Jewish family, just a few years before French colonization would forever change the relationship and place of Jews in Morocco. And yet, there is no hint of the significance of the photo and its timeline in the accompanying metadata.

One article in this Special Section discusses the necessity of redescribing a similar collection of images from the MENA region; another specifically addresses the challenges that documenting and preserving Moroccan Jewish heritage poses today. From archival practitioners in Detroit, Michigan, comes an article that seeks to make connections between collections on Arab Americans in US repositories, seeing them as a unique ethnic-linguistic group that is often forced to claim whiteness in US society. One article examines how western institutions manage archival repositories in the MENA region and how they adapt to local realities, while another argues for the legislation required to establish a national archives in Kuwait. The Special Section also features a discussion on the necessary development of counter-archives in and around Iran and Iraq to better document the socially marginalized and the underdocumented.

As we finalize this issue for publication, the horrific bombings of civilians in Palestine continue in a struggle that has gone on for decades. We must acknowledge that the targets are not only innocent women, men, and children, but also their memories, histories, and archives. The field of archives in the United States is working ever more ferociously to let communities in, to make space for local conceptions of archival records and collections, to redescribe, and to repatriate. The archival landscape of North Africa and the Middle East is ripe for such discussions and work, and we are honored to present the articles herein.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tamim al-Barghouti, "God and Goat," In *Jerusalem and Other Poems* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2017), 13.